DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 008 IR 015 870

AUTHOR Willis, Barry
TITLE Strategies for Teaching at a Distance. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources, Syracuse, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-IR-92-8
PUB DATE Nov 92
CONTRACT RI88062008
NOTE 4p.; Digest based in part on "Distance Education: A Practical Guide" (Barry Willis, 1993).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Delivery Systems; *Distance Education; Educational Planning; *Educational Strategies; Educational Technology; Needs Assessment; Nontraditional Education; Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Effective teaching at a distance is more the result of preparation than innovation. The distance educator can employ a number of strategies focusing on planning, student understanding, interaction, and teaching to ensure a successfully delivered course. This digest discusses six topics in teaching at a distance: (1) What's Different about Distance Teaching?--lack of visual cues, use of technological devices, lack of spontaneous class discussion; (2) Why Teach at a Distance?--opportunities to reach a wider audience, meet the needs of learners, involve outside speakers; (3) Improving Planning and Organization--the core content remains basically unchanged, although its presentation requires new strategies and additional preparation time; (4) Meeting Student Needs--adapt the delivery system to best motivate and meet the needs of the students so that they can quickly become comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance; (5) Improving Interaction and Feedback--using effective interaction and feedback strategies will enable the instructor to identify and meet individual student needs while providing a forum for suggesting course improvements; and (6) Use Effective Distance Teaching Skills--this requires enhancing existing skills rather than developing new ones. (Contains 7 references.) (ALF)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED351008

# STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AT A DISTANCE

**EDO-IR-92-8**

**by**

**Barry Willis**

**ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources**
**Syracuse University**
**Syracuse, New York**

**November 1992**

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC

ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources

Syracuse University
School of Education • School of Information Studies
030 Huntington Hall
Syracuse, New York 13244-2340
(315) 443-3640

ERIC DIGEST

November 1992 EDO-IR-92-8

# Strategies for Teaching at a Distance

By Barry Willis

This digest is based in part on *Distance Education: A Practical Guide*, by Barry Willis, 1993.

Effective teaching at a distance is more the result of preparation than innovation. The distance educator can employ a number of strategies focusing on planning, student understanding, interaction, and teaching to ensure a successfully delivered course.

## What's Different about Distance Teaching?

Classroom teachers rely on a number of visual and unobtrusive cues from their students to enhance their delivery of instructional content. A quick glance, for example, reveals who is attentively taking notes, pondering a difficult concept, or preparing to make a comment. The student who is frustrated, confused, tired, or bored is equally evident. The attentive teacher consciously and subconsciously receives and analyzes these visual cues and adjusts the course delivery to meet the needs of the class during any particular lesson.

In contrast, the distant teacher has few, if any, visual cues. Those cues that do exist are filtered through technological devices such as video monitors. It is difficult to carry on a stimulating teacher-class discussion when spontaneity is altered by technical requirements and distance.

Without the use of a real-time visual medium such as television, the teacher receives no visual information from the distant sites. The teacher might never really know, for example, if students are asleep, talking among themselves, or even in the room. Separation by distance also affects the general rapport of the class. Living in different communities, geographic regions, or even states deprives the teacher and students of a common community link.

## Why Teach at a Distance?

The challenges posed by distance teaching are countered by opportunities to reach a wider student audience; to meet the needs of students who are unable to attend on-campus classes; to involve outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable; and to link students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds. Many teachers feel the opportunities offered by distance education outweigh the obstacles. In fact, instructors often comment that the focused preparation required by distance teaching improves their overall teaching ability and empathy for their students.

## Improving Planning and Organization

In developing or adapting distance instruction, the core content remains basically unchanged, although its presentation requires new strategies and additional preparation time. Suggestions for planning and organizing a distance delivered course include:

- Begin the course planning process by studying distance education research findings. There are several excellent research summaries available (see Blanchard, 1989; Moore & Thompson, 1990).
- Before developing something new, check and review existing materials for content and presentation ideas.
- Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of possible delivery approaches, in terms of learner needs and course requirements, before selecting a mix of instructional technology. Avoid "technological solutions in search of instructional problems."
- Hands-on training with the technology of delivery is critical for both teacher and students. Consider a pre-class session in which the class meets informally using the delivery technology and learns about the roles and responsibilities of technical support staff.
- At the start of class initiate a frank discussion to set rules, guidelines, and standards. Once procedures have been established, consistently uphold them.
- Make sure each site is properly equipped with functional and accessible equipment. Provide a toll-free "hotline" for reporting and rectifying problems.
- If course materials are sent by mail, make sure they are received well before class begins. To help students keep materials organized, consider binding the syllabus, handouts, and other readings prior to distribution.
- Start off slowly with a manageable number of sites and students. The logistical difficulties of distant teaching increase with each additional site.
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the instructional delivery systems available to you (e.g., audio, video, data, and print) as well as the technical means by which they are delivered (e.g., satellite, microwave, fiber optic cable, etc.).

## Meeting Student Needs

To function effectively, students must quickly become comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance. Efforts should be made to adapt the delivery system to best motivate and meet the needs of the students, in terms of both content and preferred learning styles (see Coldeway, Spencer, & Stringer, 1980). Consider the following strategies for meeting students' needs:

- Make students aware of and comfortable with new patterns of communication to be used in the course (see Holmberg, 1985).
- Learn about students' backgrounds and experiences. Discussing the instructor's background and interests is equally important.
- Be sensitive to different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds. Remember, for example, that students may

have different language skills, and that humor is culturally specific and won't be perceived the same way by all (see Sponder, 1990).

- Remember that students must take an active role in the distance delivered course by independently taking responsibility for their learning.
- Assist students in becoming familiar and comfortable with the delivery technology and prepare them to resolve the technical problems that will arise. Focus on joint problem solving, not placing blame for the occasional technical difficulty.
- Be aware of students' needs in meeting standard university deadlines, despite the lag time often involved in rural mail delivery.

## Improving Interaction and Feedback

Using effective interaction and feedback strategies will enable the instructor to identify and meet individual student needs while providing a forum for suggesting course improvements. To improve interaction and feedback, consider the following:

- Integrate a variety of delivery systems for interaction and feedback, including one-on-one and conference calls, fax, electronic mail, video, and computer conferencing. When feasible, consider personal visits as well.
- Contact each site (or student) every week if possible, especially early in the course. Take note of students who don't participate during the first session, and contact them individually after class.
- Make detailed comments on written assignments, referring to additional sources for supplementary information. Return assignments without delay, using fax or electronic mail, if practical.
- Arrange telephone office hours using a toll-free number. Set evening hours if most of your students work during the day.
- Early in the course, require students to contact you and interact among themselves via electronic mail, so that they become comfortable with the process. Maintaining and sharing electronic journal entries can be very effective towards this end.
- Use pre-class study questions and advance organizers to encourage critical thinking and informed participation on the part of all learners. Realize that it will take time to improve poor communication patterns.
- Have students keep a journal of their thoughts and ideas regarding the course content, as well as their individual progress and other concerns. Have students submit journal entries frequently.
- Use pre-stamped and addressed postcards and out-of-class phone conferences for feedback regarding course content, relevancy, pace, delivery problems, and instructional concerns.
- Call on individual students to ensure that all participants have ample opportunity to interact. At the same time, politely but firmly discourage individual students or sites from monopolizing class time.
- Use an on-site facilitator to stimulate interaction when distant students are hesitant to ask questions or participate. In addition, the facilitator can act as your onsite "eyes and ears."

## Use Effective Distance Teaching Skills

For the most part, effective distance teaching requires enhancing existing skills, rather than developing new abilities. Pay special attention to the following:

- Develop strategies for student reinforcement, review, repetition, and remediation. Towards this end, one-on-one phone discussions and electronic mail communication can be especially effective.
- Realistically assess the amount of content that can be effectively delivered in the course. Because of the logistics involved, presenting content at a distance is usually more time consuming than presenting the same content in a traditional classroom setting.
- Diversify and pace course activities and avoid long lectures. Intersperse content presentations with discussions and student-centered exercises.
- Be aware that student participants will have different learning styles. Some will learn more easily in group settings, while others will excel when working independently. While the same is true in traditional classroom settings, preferred student learning styles may be more difficult to determine at a distance.
- Humanize the course by focusing on the students, not the delivery system.
- Consider providing a strong print component to supplement non-print materials (see Graham & Wedman, 1989).
- Use locally relevant case studies and examples as often as possible to assist students in understanding and applying course content.
- Be concise. Use short, cohesive statements and ask direct questions, realizing that technical linkages might increase the time it takes for students to respond.
- Personalize instructor involvement, realizing that distance teaching does not replace the value of face-to-face contact and small group interaction. If budget and time permit, teach at least one session from each site. Typically, the earlier in the course this is done, the better.
- And Finally...Relax. Participants will quickly grow comfortable with the process of distance education and the natural rhythm of effective teaching and learning will return.

## References


Blanchard, W. (1989). *Telecourse effectiveness: A research-review update*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Board for Community College Education. (ED 320 554).

Coldeway, D.E., Spencer, R., & Stringer, M. (1980). *Factors effecting learner motivation in distance education: The interaction between learner attributes and learner course performance. REDEAL Research Report #9*. Project REDEAL Research and Evaluation of Distance Education for the Adult Learner. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Athabasca University. (ED 249 346).

Graham, S.W., & Wedman, J.F. (1989). Enhancing the appeal of teletraining. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 16(4), 183-191.

Holmberg, B. (1985). Communication in distance study. In *Status and trends of distance education*. Lund, Sweden: Lector Publishing.

Moore, M.G., & Thompson, M.M., with Quigley, A.B., Clark, G.C., & Goff, G.G. (1990). *The effects of distance learning: A summary of the literature. Research Monograph No. 2*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, American Center for the Study of Distance Education. (ED 330 321).

Sponder, B. (1990). *Distance education in rural Alaska: An overview of teaching and learning practices in audioconference courses. University of Alaska Monograph Series in Distance Education No. 1*. Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska, Center for Cross-Cultural Studies. (ED 325 276).

Willis, B. (1993). *Distance education: A practical guide*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.



This digest was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information Resources by Barry Willis, Statewide Director of Distance Education, University of Alaska System. November 1992.



ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.



*This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062008. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.*